

A TOFF MYSTERY-SUSPENSE NOVEL

JOHN CREASEY

A BUNDLE FOR THE TOFF



A baby on his doorstep marks the Toff
for blackmail—and murder!

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FATHER'S DAY . . .

Syd Bishop spoke, his voice gruff. "Nothing could have happened to her, could it?" "That's what we're going to find out," said the Toff.

Syd flung himself out of the house, slamming the door so hard that the walls seemed to shake. The Toff turned away and went upstairs. He wanted to talk to Pop—obviously the boy was frightened as well as resentful of his father. Ten minutes with the older man might prove valuable.

Rollison pushed the bedroom door open. A man was lying on the bed, his eyes staring toward the ceiling. He seemed strangely still. Then the Toff saw the single gash across his throat.

The awful thing was that, apart from a dark-red patch on the pillow on either side of his neck, there was no sign of blood.

A BUNDLE FOR THE TOFF

John Creasey

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BUNDLE ON THE THRESHOLD

The heart of London is large, to some it is warm, to others, perhaps to very many others, it is as cold as ice. In that heart live human beings of all classes and of all income groups, from duke to dustman, from millionaire to pauper.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable is the Honorable Richard Rollison, known for many excellent reasons as "the Toff." Good-looking, rich and adventurous, he mixes freely with both the social élite and the underworld. It has been said that no one ever turned to him for help in vain. According to his man Jolly he is over-generous; certainly he has been known to open his pocket and his home to ex-convicts to whom few others would give house-room.

One bitter cold night in March, the Toff had been dining a little more freely than usual. It was many years since he had drunk sufficiently to loosen his tongue, but occasionally the right food, the right wine and the right companion, put an added sparkle in his eyes.

This was such a night.

The elderly taxi-driver who watched him unlock the street door of the house in Gresham Terrace where he had his flat knew him quite well. He did not know the lady with him, but the street lamp shone down on her, revealing the unquestionable fact that she was beautiful.

The door opened, and Rollison and his companion went inside.

It was only a little after twelve o'clock, so the night could still, by the sophisticated, be considered young. It was therefore quite conceivable that the Honorable Richard was going to change his shoes or his shirt or

even his deep purple cummerbund, before going on to dance at a night club, or take his chance at a casino. It was equally conceivable that Perdita Shortt was going simply to conduct some running repairs to stocking or bra. There was no reason at all why, as they reached the first of three landings on the dimly lit, unromantic stone staircase, they should not pause, and without a word, embrace.

After all, Richard Rollison was in his forties, and a bachelor. And Perdita Shortt was a widow in her thirties, a widow, moreover, excessively endowed with the world's, as well as a woman's, goods.

A stranger, regarding the couple dispassionately, would almost certainly have approved of the obvious pleasure each took in the other's company. He might well have followed their progress up the stairs with benign indulgence, noting Rollison's arm about Perdita's waist. The light, such as it was, seemed to make their eyes glow even more brightly—eyes already bright with the sparkle of champagne.

At the next landing, they dallied a little longer.

"Perdita," whispered the Toff.

"Yes," whispered Perdita.

"You are a very, very, beautiful woman."

"You are a very, very, handsome man."

"So long as you realize that I am a man."

"Are you beginning to wonder whether I'm a woman?" asked Perdita. She held her head back and looked at him through half-closed lashes.

"I think I know," Rollison said. "But I'm very hard to convince about anything."

"I'll convince you," Perdita promised, and her laughter carried a challenge which Rollison was unable to ignore.

It was one of the very few occasions when he forgot the dangers inherent in such a situation, for once inside his flat, they would be alone. Jolly, his man, was away visiting a sick brother, and there were those who said

that, but for Jolly, the Toff would have been married at least a dozen times over.

Perdita and Rollison went slowly up the next flight of stairs and started, even more slowly, arms linked, up the next and last.

Reaching the landing and the stout, chestnut-colored door of Number 22g, they noticed nothing untoward. Rollison, in his temporary enchantment, had forgotten, and Perdita had never realized, that anything from poison gas to a bullet, from a prize-fighter to a pick-pocket, or from a murderer to a policeman, might be waiting in grim or deadly welcome.

Rollison took out his key ring, inserted the key unerringly into the lock while still looking at Perdita, and pushed the door.

"My home," he announced. "My castle."

"My lord," Perdita said, "I am a paralytic."

"You are a *what?*"

"A paralytic. When about to enter strange castles, the muscles of my legs become atrophied, and I cannot walk."

"Ah," said Rollison, sensing danger, unable, nevertheless, to resist playing with it. "You mean you feel as timid as a bride, and must be carried over the threshold?"

"You are most discerning," Perdita murmured. "Of course, if you're not man enough to carry me——"

She laughed once again, and Rollison laughed also as he moved with swift, almost startling speed, lifted her as if she were a casket of feathers, and stepped masterfully through the doorway.

Unfortunately, his path was not clear. He was barely across the threshold when his foot kicked something soft, not heavy, but heavy enough to trip him up and send him right off balance. Instinctively, he hugged Perdita more closely to him, staggering helplessly, not knowing whether he could save himself from pitching over.

The wild momentum slackened. A little less instinc-

tively he turned his shoulder to the wall. Still holding Perdita, he crashed into it, but apart from the shock of the impact, she came to no harm and he did no more than bruise himself. He lowered Perdita's feet to the floor, and for a few quivering seconds they clung together. Then drawing apart, they turned and looked down at the threshold.

He saw a bundle of rags, just inside the door.

So did Perdita.

Rollison ran his hand across his forehead, staring at the bundle, and asked in a low-pitched voice:

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," replied Perdita, shakily.

"I'm sorry if I shook you up."

"I can't imagine how you managed to keep on your feet."

"Luck," said Rollison; then in a mystified voice: "Look."

She was staring in the same direction as he, and as intently.

"Do you see what I see?" Rollison went on.

"It's a—blanket."

"It's a—bundle of rags."

"No," Perdita said, more sharply. "It's a shawl."

"A *what?*"

"It's a shawl," repeated Perdita in a sharper voice, and then added in sudden anxiety: "Oh, my goodness!"

She freed herself from Rollison's supporting arm and rushed back towards the door, dropping on one knee, a kind of urgency suddenly upon her.

Rollison followed, leaning over her as she unwrapped the bundle of rags which might be a shawl or even a blanket. Suddenly he saw the top of a tiny head and an unmistakable wisp of jet black hair.

"No," he breathed.

But even as astonishment gave way to shock, and shock to alarm, even as the first presentiment of catastrophe

came to him, it was as if another part of him stood aside, marveling. The charming young widow, with all her brittle sophistication, was changing before his eyes. In place of the challenge to adventure, the awareness, the "I dare you" in her gaze, there was now all the selflessness, the yearning of a mother. She had forgotten Rollison. She had forgotten herself. She was aware only of this tiny infant. With infinite gentleness she put aside the rags. She did not look round, but said in a firm, decisive voice:

"Get some warm water, and some soft towels, then some hot-water bottles. Hurry please." Rollison stared as she looked down at the child, then slowly, carefully, lifted it to her bosom.

"Hurry," she repeated. "Please hurry."

He turned to the bathroom.

He was dazed and bewildered, but the habit of efficiency and of calm in the face of all emergencies very soon asserted itself. In the kitchen cupboard, he knew, there was a stack of fibreglass bowls, used by Jolly for various culinary purposes.

He removed several smaller bowls from a large one, half filled this with hot water, then tempered the hot with cold. Carrying it into the bathroom, he stood it on the W.C. pan and drew up a cork-topped stool. The airing cupboard was just outside the bathroom, and he took down a pile of towels and felt them for softness and thickness.

He heard Perdita, turned and saw her standing behind him, the baby in her arms.

"Is it ready?" she demanded.

"Yes. Everything all right?" Somehow he could not bring himself to frame the question which had sprung to his mind: "Is the child dead?"

"It's alive," she answered.

"Good!"

"Just," she qualified. "We must have a doctor."

"Or a nurse."

"I'm the nurse," said Perdita. She gave him a strangely piercing look. "Do you think your doctor will know anything about newborn babies?"

"Newborn——!" he stopped, aghast.

"Do you?"

"I can soon find out," he said.

"Do that," said Perdita, almost tartly.

She saw the bowl of water, and hesitated, Rollison stood with the towels in his hands, and Perdita suddenly thrust the baby at him, and said:

"Keep perfectly still."

She placed the baby on the towels he was carrying; Rollison could see a tiny, pink, wrinkled face—that, and the fluffy wisp of hair, was all that was visible. He stood motionless, almost fearful, while Perdita slipped off her sable wrap, put her hands to the back of her neck, unzipped, then, with a few quick movements, slipped out of her tight black evening dress. Taking a pale blue bathrobe from the back of the door, she put it on and knotted the sash. Then she moved past Rollison to the bowl of water and dipped the back of her hand into it.

"That's about right," she approved. "Let me have her." Her?

Sitting on the stool, she placed the baby on her lap.

"Will you call the doctor, then get the bottles?" she asked.

"Yes," said Rollison. "Yes, I will." Once again, as she looked up at him, he noted that strangely penetrating glance.

Turning towards the sitting-room, he watched, at once fascinated and repelled, as Perdita began to unwrap the infant, glimpsing the rest of the tiny, pink face, the unbelievably wrinkled arms and shoulders, thinking, "It *can't* be alive." Reaching the telephone, he began to dial the doctor, who lived across the street, but suddenly he put

down the receiver, paused long enough to get the dialing tone and dialed a Mayfair number.

The ringing went on for a long time, and he began to fear that he was too late.

Then: "The Marigold Club," a woman answered.

"Is that Maria?" Rollison asked.

"Why, yes," the woman said, her voice warming. "How are you, Mr. Rollison?"

It might have been one o'clock in the afternoon, and not one o'clock in the morning.

"A very worried man," declared Rollison.

"Oh, I *am* sorry. Lady Gloria's away, you know, but if I can help——"

"Maria," Rollison interrupted, "a few months ago you had a spot of bother with a prematurely born child. Remember?"

"I do indeed!"

"And you rushed it to the hospital."

"It's a *beautiful* baby now," enthused Maria. "You ought to see——"

"If you had another one, how soon could you get the hospital alerted?"

"In a very few minutes," answered Maria. "I'd just telephone and ask for an ambulance with an incubator." She caught her breath. "But Mr. Rollison——"

"Did you take it to St. Mary's or did they send for it?"

"Oh, they sent an ambulance. But——"

"Telephone them straight away and tell them to send an ambulance and incubator to Gresham Terrace," pleaded Rollison. "Someone's left a newborn baby on my doorstep. And Maria—please ask them to hurry." He rang off on her hasty promise.

All at once he started, and stood motionless. His glance passed, unseeing, round the big living-room, past the wall covered with trophies of strange hunts and captures, past his large desk, coming finally to the open door, through

which streamed the light from the bathroom. It was warm, but not warm enough to explain the sweat on his forehead, which, after a sudden vivid flash of understanding, ran in tiny rivulets down his face.

Perdita's gaze had seemed almost accusing. Now, at last, he realized what suspicions had prompted it.

The unsaid words echoed through and through his head.

"But why should anyone leave a baby here, Richard, if it isn't yours?"

SUSPICION

As he stood there, sobered both by the incident and by this new thought, Rollison was scowling. He could hear the rustle of movements and a gentle splashing of water, followed by a murmuring or humming sound. Quite suddenly, he smiled, his spirits rising inexplicably. He tiptoed from the living-room and along the passage to the kitchen, filled two rubber hot-water bottles—kept, so his man insisted, for guests—and went back to the bathroom.

Perdita *was* crooning, but he still thought he could detect a note of tension in her manner. The smile faded from his lips, and a fresh encroachment of anxiety for the child dampened his newly found high spirits.

"How is he?" he inquired.

Perdita did not look round, but asked:

"Is the doctor coming?"

"An ambulance will soon be here from St. Mary's Hospital," Rollison said, handing her the bottles.

"*Ambulance?*"

"With an incubator or what-do-you-call-it," Rollison went on. "The quicker we can get the little beggar into expert hands, the better. How is he?"

"It's a girl," Perdita insisted. She was wrapping the child up in an enormous bundle of warm towels, one hot-water bottle near the top of the bundle, another near the bottom, making it look big and bulky. Rollison could just see the tiny head at the end of a gigantic cylindrical roll of white.

"Perdita," he said firmly, "I want to know how she is."

After a pause, Perdita swiveled round on the stool, looked at him squarely and said:

"Her heart's beating, but she's terribly frail. She can't

be more than a few hours old—a day at most. What a shocking thing to do.” The words rapped out as if the plight of the tiny creature on her lap really wrung Perdita’s heart. Rollison was annoyed with himself because his reactions had been so egotistical: how would this affect *him*? As he looked down on the woman with whom he had been dancing and laughing only a short while before, he was once again, amazed at the change in her.

He thought spontaneously: Mother and child.

Perdita asked sharply: “Why are you looking at me like that?”

It would be almost impossible, certainly unwise, to put his thoughts into words, so he said quite lightly:

“Even in my bathrobe, you’re the loveliest woman I know.”

Before she could respond, the front door bell rang.

“Could that be the ambulance?” Perdita asked.

“If it is, they’ve really got a move on,” Rollison called over his shoulder.

They had indeed.

As he opened the door, a young doctor appeared, followed by two ambulance men carrying the incubator, complete with oxygen and a humidifier, blankets and hot-water bottles. They moved quickly and competently, taking complete control. The doctor lifted the child, glanced approvingly at Perdita, and said:

“I wish we always found them as well-cared for.”

“*Always?*” echoed Perdita. “You mean this often happens?”

“Not exactly twice a night, but far too often,” the doctor said. He placed the infant gently inside the incubator. “And far too often the police find only the bodies, or the skeletons. Peculiar things, people.” He was about twenty-eight and fresh-faced, but his manner was that of one old and wearied in his contact with human nature.

“Have you told the police, Mr. Rollison?”

“Not yet.”